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THE SOUTH'S AWAKENING

BY

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Address before the Alpha Chapter, Phi Beta Kappa, of Tulane University

NEW ORLEANS, JUNE FIRST
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The South's Awakening

ADDRESS BEFORE THE ALPHA CHAPTER, PHI BETA KAPPA, OF TULANE UNIVERSITY, NEW ORLEANS, JUNE 1, 1915.

After hearing your more than generous words of introduction, I am tempted to agree with that man who said that he would take care of his traducers, if his friends would look out for his introducers. Permit me to thank you, Mr. President, for the honor you have conferred upon me in asking me to address the Alpha Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa—this ancient and honorable society which has "Friendship for its basis, Benevolence and Literature for its pillars." In this day of the ready rupture of Triple Alliances, I would venture the hope that this Triple Alliance of Learning, and Virtue, and Patriotism, as Lafayette once put it, may remain forever permanent and intact. I bring you the felicitations of your sister Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa at Carolina, and to the President of your University the greetings of another former professor of English, whose wife, née Susan Moses, was formerly an instructor in Newcomb — my classmate and fellow-member in Phi Beta Kappa, the new president of our University, Dr. Graham. Only the other day I clasped the hand of Dr. Alderman, to whom both Tulane and Carolina may lay just claim—and he spoke in terms of warm affection of this place, this people, and this institution. With sadness, I miss the face of that cultured scholar and debonair gentleman, Professor Fortier, who used to share at table with me his copies of the *Picayune* and the *Figaro;* with pleasure, I welcome the opportunity to see again my friends, Miss Stone, Professor Woodward, Professor Bechtel, and my erstwhile colleague, Courtland Curtis. I have come a long way to be with you on this occasion; and I feel like that old Westerner I once heard remark in response to the usual bromide on such occasions: "Well, it's not that the world is such a small place, after all—but that the people in it are so damned active."

On receiving your invitation, I began to fish around in my mind for an idea; and after waiting a long time without getting a 'bite,'' I could sympathize with the little boy who, in answer to the inquiry of a passer-by as to what he was doing, replied that he was fishing for snigs. ''Snigs,'' exclaimed the questioner, ''And pray, what are snigs?'' To which the little boy mournfully replied, ''I dunno. I h'aint cotch none yit.'' At last, a phrase in an old letter concerning this very society met my eye, and, shall I say, swallowed my bait?

More than a century and a quarter ago, John Beckley of Virginia, writing to a friend at Yale College, expressed the hope that this society might ''produce a union through the various climes and countries of this great continent, of all lovers of *literary* merit * * *'' So, like another Don Quixote, I would enter your lists to-night in behalf of that forlorn and hapless damsel, hight Literature. With John Galsworthy I would exclaim:

> ''Come! let us lay a crazy lance in rest,
> And tilt at wind-mills under the wild sky!
> For who would live so petty and unblest
> That dare not tilt at something ere he die,
> Rather than, screened by safe majority,
> Preserve his little life to little ends,
> And never raise a rebel battle-cry!''

A vital problem which we all face in America, and especially in the South, is the problem of literature in a democracy. Only in the life of the sovereign people, as reflected in our history, are to be found the creative seeds from which the flower of a great literature may spring. Many of you have seen upon University Heights in New York a noble structure of gleaming white marble, an enduring monument to American genius, the Hall of Fame. Upon only one of the fifty-one tablets thus far placed upon its walls is the South represented by a distinctively literary genius—a man of English parentage who happened to be born in Boston, Massachusetts—Edgar Allan Poe. With the possible exception of Lanier, Southern writers before his day never received recognition and support as national writers. The principal figures which come to mind—Simms, Cooke, Timrod,

Hayne, Ryan, O'Hara, Wilde—were gifted writers, occasionally inspired with the touch of genius, yet more often treading the pedestrian paths of localized view, conventional theme, and imperfect technic.

And yet, the very real merits of these Southern writers have been uniformly ignored—more through ignorance of their writings than through any prejudice against this division of the United States. And a just and adequate History of American Literature, throwing Southern genius into true perspective in the national picture, yet remains to be written. It behooves the Southern critic to be modest, yet *firm,* in his claims for Southern genius. With respect to our literature in the South as a whole, we should evidence that delightful sense of modesty exhibited by the young Creole girl who went to confessional. "Father," she said, "I have committed an awful sin. I have permitted a young man to kiss me." "Daughter," replied the holy man, "that is not an unpardonable sin. How many times did he kiss you?" "Father," she said, regarding him reproachfully, "I am here to confess, not to boast." It is blind loyalty to a mistaken ideal which dictates the affirmation that America, even, has yet given to the world a literature primitively and originally distinctive of our national life. Poe was a world-wide genius, who still moves to creative reflections artistic genius in all lands; but he was a denizen of a No-Man's Land of the imagination, strangely unrelated to the soil from which he sprang. Whitman was a prophet of the new time—a bold, frank spirit who previsaged a cosmic dream of democratic art; but his own art was the splendid tentative of an undeveloped Titan. Cooper stirred the metropolitan imagination with his esthetic presentment of the most romantic figure of American origin, the Red Man; but it was the stunning novelty of the aboriginal figure, cradled in the primitive conditions of barbaric freedom, rather than any novel mode of presentment, which caught and enthralled the fancy of an over-civilized and over-governed Europe. Mark Twain set up the great cosmic laugh of good humor which still echoes round the world; but even the most loyal American cannot deny that he was deficient in culture. A genuine American type of literary genius, fully combining culture with picturesqueness, suavity with native self-reliance,

I venture to believe, still awaits the imprimatur of international recognition.

For years I have searched deeply into the causes for the comparative dearth of literary and artistic productivity in the South, and for that genial, nonchalant Southern indifference to *publication*—publication, the rock upon which literary fame is founded. I seem to find, in the intellectual and cultural history of the South, four distinctive periods, each leaving its ineffaceable impress upon the life of the nation.

The first of these eras of Southern cultural development is the era of the courtly country gentleman, profound student of politics and history, leisurely reader of the classics and the humanities. In this era, the South was far more than the copartner of the North in shaping the early history of the Union. In a memorable speech in the United States Senate, Charles Sumner frankly stated that for sixty years the South governed the country through its able men in Congress and the Presidency. In constructive statesmanship, continental thinking, and inspiriting nationalism, this era of Southern dominance in national affairs is without a parallel in our national annals. The writings of the elder Southern statesmen, beyond all doubt, were an invaluable contribution to the literature of America. The state papers of these men, of vast intellectual scope and imaginative reach, breathing lofty ideals, yet stiffened by the hardy practicality of the founders of the Republic, stand as yet unrivalled in the nation's intellectual history. They owe their chief eminence less to originality of thought than to adequate interpretation of the needs of a new nation, and their universality of application to the problems of a democratic civilization.

Coincident with, and consequent to, this first cycle in our intellectual evolution, came the second era, stretching approximately from 1830 to 1861. There is no era in American history, in relation to the state of culture and the feeling of class consciousness in the South, which has been so crassly misunderstood. One cannot wholly blame the romantic novelists for throwing into strong focus, if false perspective, the aristocratic and oligarchic features of Southern life—the romantic survival upon Southern soil of a species of belated feudalism. These were the beautiful and picturesque phases of Southern life,

ready-made to the hand of the fictive artist; and it is no wonder that people still think of the War between the States as simply a struggle of Puritan and Cavalier, a clash of the ideals of the Lees of Virginia with the ideals of the Adamses of Massachusetts.

There is falsehood in this alluring, if distorted, picture. Recent economic investigations tend conclusively to demonstrate that life in the rural South in antebellum days was measurably democratic; and that the political leaders owed their selection, not to a landed aristocracy, but to the great masses of the people. The aristocracy of leadership in the South was an aristocracy, not of birth, but of merit; not of blood, but of sheer, efficient achievement. The truly typical home of the South was not a Monticello or an Arlington, but a simple four-room house, the home of a homogeneous and pure-blooded people. The leaders came from all classes of the people, high and low, rich and poor alike. But the vital social deficiency in the situation, it must be clearly indicated, was that, though all classes furnished leaders, the aristocratic, semi-oligarchic class, of lordly leisure and patriarchal dignity, revelled in a monopoly of culture, whilst the great middle class, the structural and preponderant element of the population, remained submerged in a twilight of sectionalism, provincialism, and obscured vision.

History confirms the familiar theory that epoch-making movements in industrial prosperity are contemporaneous with a quickening of the intellectual life and a vitalization of the intellectual resources of a people. We should expect, then, in the antebellum South an era of fertility in inventiveness, of power in imaginativeness, during the great industrial era subsequent to 1830. New England responded nobly to the economic quickening of the national life with the classic and permanent monuments of American literature, the works of Longfellow, Lowell, Whittier, Hawthorne, Emerson, and Holmes. What explanation do we find for the comparative dearth of literary productivity in the South during the same period?

In the South, a local exigency of supreme significance effectually diverted the genius of the people from the library to the rostrum, from the study to the forum. Within the body politic was encysted, like extraneous metal in irritated flesh, the

vexing problem of the negro and his destiny. The need of the hour, the subconscious pressure for a vindication of her position on constitutional grounds, summoned the South's great orators and supreme debaters. In this era of secret introspection yet passionate public defence, literature was thrust into the background by the clamorous dominance of orator and statesman. The spoken word came to exercise a relentless tyranny over the written word—a relentless tyranny which perseveres in the South to this very day. The superhuman efforts to safeguard the rights of the mass and the interests of a class left little time for the intensive study so indispensable for the production and publication of a body of great literature.

The error of literary historians in affirming that literary culture found no lodgment in the antebellum South is one of the grave errors which only the documentary facts will suffice to combat. Powerful obstacles militated then—and in considerable measure militate to-day—against widespread preoccupation with literature and the obligations of creative scholarship. The people, an agricultural class, were widely scattered. There were no great cosmopolitan cities, bar New Orleans, to serve as centers of literary activity and forges of creative workmanship. In the South there were no great publishing houses, which by their very existence furnish a perpetual incentive to productivity and publication. The political exigency of the hour, the ambition of the Southerner to *maintain* that political eminence which he had already so effectually achieved, monopolized the supply of dynamic literary force. If the Southerner, conservative to the backbone, neglected the native authors,—and it is feared that he neglected them *sadly*—it was because of his absorption in the reading of the great classics of antiquity, and of English and Continental literature.

In his recently published history of the publishing firm of the Harpers, Mr. J. Henry Harper tells of the vast quantity of books, especially important publications of standard literary works, sold by that firm to Southern book-buyers in the antebellum period. "At this period," he says, "the business of the house had become widely extended. The firm was engaged in the publication of many important works, as well as in the conduct of their two periodicals. The brothers had many intimate friends

in the South, and a great deal of their business was with Southern houses; for in the years preceding the Civil War, the South was a great buyer of books.'' Another New York publisher acknowledges that his costliest invoices of European literature went to ''the old mansions on the banks of the James and the Savannah and the bluffs of the Mississippi.'' In a current work detailing the history of the publishing firm of the Putnams, established by his father, Dr. George Haven Putnam tells of the great shipments of standard literary works to the South, notably to New Orleans, before the war between the States—greater then, comments he with a certain almost comic significance, than they have ever been since. ''Nothing could be more remarkable,'' says Joseph LeConte in his *Autobiography,* ''than the wide reading, the deep reflection, the refined culture, and the originality of thought and observation characteristic of them (the Southern planters); and yet the idea of publication never entered their heads.''

Since 1865, the South has devoted her utmost energies to the rebuilding, upon broader and more universal outlines, of a civilization economically laid waste by the ravages of civil war. This she has triumphantly begun, and to-day the new South moves without restraint and with propulsive impetus along the path of normal industrial and economic progress.

Following, if not virtually coincident with, the economic restoration of the fallen South, the disestablishment of an individualistic democracy and a pervasiely agricultural industry by a communistic democracy and a fully diversified industrial life, has proceeded the tremendous educational crusade of our period. The keynote of that splendid crusade may be found in the words of Pasteur, noblest exemplar of modern civilization: ''Democracy is that order in the State which enables each individual to put forth his utmost effort.''

Unhesitatingly, the South recognized the ''common man as the truest asset of a democracy,'' and resolved to educate that *precious comman man* to the tasks of leadership in all the avenues of an advancing civilization. The educational leaders of the South of to-day recognize in universal education the supreme force in the moulding of national character. More even than

this, it is the indispensable prerequisite to the intellectual, literary, and cultural awakening of the future.

It was in the earlier grim stages of that era of civilization-rebuilding—the release of the average man from the pressure of economic necessity and the blight of arrested cultural development—that the South temporarily relaxed her hold upon the reins of national government. Little more than a decade ago, the great educational crusader, the late Governor Charles B. Aycock of my own State—though belying the statement in his own brilliant, tragic career—regretfully acknowledged that at that moment the people of the South "had less effect upon the thought and action of the nation than at any period of our history." The thinking of the South had ceased to be an appreciable factor in the councils of the nation.

The election of Woodrow Wilson and the quindecennial anniversary of Gettysburg marked the *transit of an era.* "A complete change," as a distinguished publicist recently said, "involving after many years the restoration to power in large measure of this great section has been effected without causing so much as a ripple of aprehension. Surely it is a fact of mighty significance that the South resumes virtual control of the United States after barely fifty years, without evoking from the most rabid parisan so much as a suspicion of the patriotism or fidelity of any one of her statesmen." In this era of the South's awakening we rejoice to see a great jurist of this State occupy the most austerely distinguished post in the Republic as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States; and my own State offers to the service of the nation a Kitchen as leader of the House, a Simmons as leader of the Senate, a Daniels and a Houston as members of the Cabinet, and a Page as Ambassador to the Court of St. James. In this dramatic resumption by the South of the control of our national destinies, there seems to operate a noble species of compensatory justice. The nation once more turns for guidance to the South, the ancient mother of national leadership.

To-day, as we stand upon the threshold of this new era, there must come to all of us a sense of joyous elation, a leaping of the blood, that it is given to us to live in such a country. While our sister republic of Mexico is racked with the dire dis-

sensions of civil strife; while Europe is a cosmic holocaust of flame and blood and steel—America stands firm for civilization and for humanity. Supreme engineering genius has cleft in twain giant Culebra and recalcitrant Panama; and to-day the lock gates at Gatun, Pedro Miguel and Miraflores hospitably fling wide the giant portals of the isthmus to the argosies of commerce, to the trade of the South, the nation, and the world.

The South is America's present land of promise. Here upon our own soil will be undertaken the next supreme experiment in the life of the nation. This will be the scene in the next great act in the American drama of industrial expansion. In the release of these vast, long pent-up forces—the educational crusade, the resumption of national control, the opening of the great canal, the movement of prosperity Southward—we may discern the promise of a great cultural awakening. A new self-consciousness in art and letters in the South is to-day the hope and the promise of Southern life.

Art, considered as a factor in civilization, is an incomparable means of widening intellectual and spiritual horizons and promoting the cause of culture. The measure of a people's advance in the fine arts is the measure of their distance from the brutes. Art is not merely an auxiliary to civilization; art is almost synonymous with civilization itself. "Life without art," as Ruskin says, "is mere brutality." And the problem which confronts the South to-day is the problem of art and literature in a democracy.

The distinguished Spanish novelist, Palacio-Valdès, somewhere says that "art is a necessary outcome of a certain degree of prosperity attained by countries when man, having overcome the obstacles which were opposed to his subsistence, recovered from his fatigue and enjoyed life quietly." We in the South have overcome obstacles opposed to material subsistence; we have established the régîme of a national democracy; we have formulated and are striving to realize the millennial dream of universal education. We have passed strenuously into the iron age of economic prosperity, idealistically into the silver age of educational optimism. We stand to-day knocking at the portals of the golden age of culture. In our time we have seen the ideals of our civilization shift from symbol to symbol. The

symbols of the first era were the bench, the bar, and the manor. The symbols of the ante-bellum era were the rostrom and the forum. The symbols of the recent era have been the furnace and the factory, the schoolhouse and the academy. Shall not the symbols of the new era be the shrines of culture, of literature, and of art?

Fourteen years ago, Dr. Alderman in his inaugural address at your university pointed out that at that time the highest expression of the South's power was not *literary*, but scientific and industrial; and he predicted that this was likely to remain so for some time to come. And I must confess that there has never been a time when the South could accurately be described as the home of the Muses. Perhaps our people have always endorsed the witty definition that *penury* is the wages of the pen. I never think of the literature of our section that I do not recall the lugubrious threnody of that famous bard of our sister Carolina, J. Gordon Coogler:

> "Alas for the South! Her books
> have grown fewer;
> She never was much given
> to literature."

Perhaps George Moore is right in his recent assertion—which we may fitly apply to the South—that the circle of readers who understand and appreciate a work of imaginative literature is certainly narrower to-day than it was a generation or more ago. I am not so sure that we care so much for reading or for books in the South—no, not even for encyclopædias. I heard not long ago of an agent who asked a farmer in one of our rural districts if he didn't want to buy an encyclopædia, to which the conservative old farmer replied: "Naw, we don't take much stock in them new-fangled machines. In this neck of the woods we still stick to the old-fashioned horse and buggy."

I have been recently impressed by an article which appeared within the year, entitled, "The Geographic Distribution of American Genius." In this article, the author, Professor Scott Nearing of the University of Pennsylvania, concludes that, of persons of eminence in the United States to-day, "an overwhelming proportion seem to have been born in that section of the

northeastern United States bounded by the Mason and Dixon line on the South, the Mississippi-Missouri river on the West." These lines seem almost to be drawn by Professor Nearing, as if with scrupulous care to include Pennsylvania and to exclude both North Carolina and Louisiana—North Carolina, which has recently memorialized John Henry Boner, whose "Poe's Cottage at Fordham" is part of the immortal heritage of American and English song, and "O'Henry," the greatest American master of the short-story of our day—whose associations with New Orleans have but lately been so fascinatingly pictured by Miss Caroline Frances Richardson; and Louisiana which, with George W. Cable, Grace King, Brander Matthews, and Ruth McEnery Stuart, has made noble and enduring contributions to the literature of English-speaking peoples.

"What is the problem of culture?" asks that brilliant critic and philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche; and his answer is unimpeachable: "To live and to work in the noblest strivings of one's nation and of humanity—not only, therefore, to receive and to learn, but to *live*. To free one's age and people from wrong tendencies, to have one's ideal before one's eyes." Let me voice my solemn conclusion that we cannot build up here in the South a great civilization— a civilization as great in art and letters, in culture and taste, as it is great in material resources, statesmanlike ideals, and an aroused social consciousness—unless we *do live* and *work* in the noblest strivings of our nation and of humanity.

It is to such an organization as this society of Phi Beta Kappa that we must look, to foster the love of learning and to stimulate the creation of works of literary and artistic genius. We look to *you* and to similar organizations to impress upon the people generally that the novelist is the maker of history, in the twofold sense—in that he projects authentic pictures of life already lived, and directs the course of events in accordance with the ideas which he embodies; and that the poet is the interpreter and the seer, whose winged words inspire the soul and become the mainspring of action. Toward the patent and glaring deficiencies in our civilization we must learn, in the language of William Watson, "to feel and understand a large and liberal discontent." Our people must be taught the realization that

literature is an incomparable means of promoting culture, widening social horizons, and advancing the cause of civilization. Literature is national and international autobiography, since it is the presentation of civilization in its best products, its most significant moments, at their highest emotional voltage. We must take to heart a significant lesson of our time: that it was not wealth or national power or military prowess, but Ibsen and Björnson, who projected little Norway into the focus of international renown.

Last of all, I would plead for a more intelligent and constructive pride in the achievements of our men and women of letters. When Orville Wright was a mere bicycle machinist, his father went into his shop one day and said, "Look here, Orville, you are simply wasting your time on this infernal flying machine. Fools have been tinkering on the thing ever since the beginning of the world, and nobody has ever flown yet. And nobody ever will—you can count on that. But if anybody ever does learn how to fly, it certainly won't be anybody from Dayton, Ohio." Let us not rashly conclude, after the fashion of the Pennsylvania professor, that all writers in the North and East are geniuses, and all writers in the South and West are—*not,* but merely negligible. We should critically weigh the claims of the Southern and Western as well as of the Northern author; and not commit the hurtful mistake of assuming that because things remote and unknown are reputed great and magnificent, therefore things near and familiar are trivial and insignificant. One of the most distinguished of living literary critics, long absent from this country, recently wrote me some months after his return: "New England seems to have lost inspiration and initiative. * * * The South possesses what no other section of the country possesses—a dominant religious, emotional feeling which lies at the root of all fundamental culture. * * * The South was created for art, poetry, religion, and song * * * You, who are leading a crusade for culture in the South, preach to your young people the vital need for working out their own salvation on their own soil, and eating the fruit of their own trees of knowledge." It is for our cultural societies and our universities in the South to inculcate the doctrine, I submit, that in this new civilization the author deserves to share with minis-

ter, statesman, educator, warrior and industrial leader the meed of popular praise and the symbol of academic renown. This enlightened spirit is to be signally displayed here to-morrow when Tulane University will graciously and fittingly confer the degree of Doctor of Literature upon two distinguished national figures in whom all Southerners feel unaffected pride, Ruth McEnery Stuart and Grace King. I call to the South of to-day to make a stand for the eternal values of literature. Let but the sections of our country—in especial the South—develop harmoniously the true heritage of their individual traditions and spirit, while always preserving the universal outlook, and we may rest assured as to the future of America's position in all the arts. "The ideal Southern writer," said Joel Chandler Harris once, "must be Southern, and yet cosmopolitan; he must be intensely local in feeling, but utterly unprejudiced and unpartisan as to opinions, tradition, and sentiment. Whenever we have a genuine Southern literature, it will be American and cosmopolitan as well. Only let it be a work of genius, and it will take all sections by storm."

ARCHIBALD HENDERSON.

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